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Washington, DC - Today Rep. Peter Welch introduced legislation to strengthen the safety of nuclear power facilities in Vermont and around the country by establishing a process for an independent safety assessment.

Welch's legislation authorizes the governor or public utility commission from a state with a nuclear power plant (or an adjoining state) to initiate an independent safety assessment conducted by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) when there is a pending application for re-licensing, a request for an increase in power above authorized levels, or a pattern of safety problems.

"This legislation establishes a process for a fair, thorough, and independent safety assessment," said Welch on its introduction. "Recent events at Vermont Yankee have raised legitimate concerns about plant management and Vermonters are entitled to an objective assurance that the facility is safe to operate."

"I believe a truly independent safety assessment with the opportunity for public input is critically important. Vermonters need to have confidence that Vermont Yankee is being operated safely at all times," Welch added.

The legislation, co-sponsored by Reps. Carol Shea-Porter (NH), Paul Hodes (NH), Edward Markey (MA), and John Olver (MA), mirrors a bill introduced earlier this year by Senator Bernie Sanders in the U.S. Senate.

"I appreciate Congressmen Welch, Shea-Porter, Hodes, Markey, and Olver and introducing legislation giving states a greater voice," said Sanders. "In an era of aging reactors being pushed past old limits to produce more and more power, the public deserves to know that safety is the single most important priority."

The independent safety assessment team would be composed of at least 25 members, consisting of not less than 16 NRC inspectors who are not assigned to the region where the facility is located, not less than six members who are independent contractors who have not worked on the licensed facility, or another nuclear facility owned or operated by the owner or operator of the facility being reviewed, and not less than three members chosen by the state official making the request. The assessment must be completed within 18 months of an eligible assessment request.

The bill directs the inspection team to report on its findings, which are to be available to the public and be considered by the NRC. The NRC is directed to postpone license extension or approval of a power uprate until any safety matters identified in the report are resolved.